Stalin's Daughter

Even today, it is hard to imagine Joseph Stalin as a family man. Like most Soviet leaders, he treated his personal life as though it was a state secret. It was, however, known that Stalin had three children. Winston Churchill came across one of them, the dictator's only daughter, Svetlana, setting the table for a Kremlin dinner in 1942. After that, little more was heard of her. And when Stalin died in 1953, she disappeared into the obscurity reserved in the U.S.S.R. for children of the no-longer elite. Last week, Svetlana emerged from that particular limbo and turned up—of all places—at the American Embassy in New Delhi, declaring that she wanted to defect from the Soviet Union.

Her decision to leave the country that her father had ruled with an iron fist for three decades undoubtedly provided the West with its most important Soviet exile since Leon Trotsky packed up and left Russia 38 years ago. After all, Svetlana was Stalin's only surviving child (one son died in the war, another in the early 1960s) and was believed to be privy to some of the darkest secrets behind the Kremlin wall.

She was born in 1926. Her mother, Stalin's second wife, Nadezhda Alliluева, died in 1932 under mysterious circumstances. Some say she committed suicide; others claim she was killed by Stalin himself during one of his frequent uncontrollable rages. During World War II, Svetlana attended Moscow University (where she once listed her father's profession on a questionnaire as "professional revolutionary"). To her classmates, she was just a poor little rich girl who arrived at school every day in a chauffeur-driven limousine, readily shared her lunch—but who could never quite break down the barrier that invariably separates royalty from those they rule. Eventually, Svetlana earned her degree in Russian literature and made her living first teaching at the Moscow Academy of Social Science, then as a translator.

Her relationship with her father was said to be suffocatingly close. Once, when she was away from home, Stalin wrote her: "I am lonesome without you," and signed it: "Little Daddy." "Stalin listened to her as he listened to few other people," said one Russian last week.

Svetlana was known to have been married at least twice—some believe as many as four times. She has two children: a son named Joseph, now 22 and studying medicine in Moscow, and a 17-year-old daughter named Ekaterina. Her last marriage—or liaison—began several years ago when she met Brijesh Singh, an Indian Communist who worked as a translator for a Soviet publishing house in Moscow. Singh, 56, the uncle of Dinesh Singh, India's Minister of State for External Affairs and a close associate of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, died in Moscow last October. And Svetlana apparently got permission to take his ashes back to India.

Asylum: She arrived in India about two months ago, and sometime during her stay apparently decided not to return home. Early last week Svetlana knocked on the door of the American Embassy in New Delhi, told a skeptical Marine guard that she was "the daughter of Stalin" and requested asylum in the U.S. At first, the startled American officials did not believe her. As soon as her identity was established, though, cables began to hum between New Delhi and Washington. Svetlana, it became clear, had placed the U.S. in an embarrassing situation. A few years ago, Washington would have welcomed a defector of her prominence with open arms. But now, such a defection could easily throw a dose of cold water on the détente with Russia. Accordingly, the Americans in New Delhi were told to refuse Svetlana an entry visa to the U.S.—but to help her in any way they could.

Suburban Villa: A few hours after she walked into the American Embassy, Svetlana, accompanied by a second secretary, Robert E. Rayle (a CIA agent attached to Ambassador Chester Bowles's staff), sped to New Delhi airport. Rayle plunked down $1,036 for two first-class plane tickets to Rome and accompanied Svetlana (who traveled under her mother's maiden name, Alliluева) on a Qantas flight to the Italian capital. There, she was bustled off to a suburban villa for four days while U.S. authorities frantically tried to arrange for an entry visa to some neutral European country—a solution which the U.S. obviously hoped would convince the Russians that the CIA had nothing to do with her defection.

During the week, the Swiss Government agreed to give Svetlana a tourist visa. "Madam Alliluева," a Swiss spokesman said, "has asked permission to enter Switzerland for a temporary period of rest. Since, according to all known facts, she has never indulged in political activities, her request was granted." On Saturday, therefore, Svetlana, wearing an olive green coat and looking drawn, flew into Geneva's Cointrin Airport aboard a four-engined Vickers Viscount. Reporters crowded around her as she stepped off the plane. "Are you going to seek asylum in Switzerland?" she was asked. A trace of a smile crept over Svetlana's face, and she seemed to shake her head slightly. Then, she climbed into the back of a gray Ford Zephyr and sped away toward Bern—and asylum in the Bernese Oberland, a vast, rich mountainous holiday region dotted with ski resorts and peaceful Swiss hamlets.

Why had Stalin's daughter decided to leave Russia? Some reports from India said that she feared for her life if she returned home. A more likely explanation, however, was that she had never quite recovered from the shock she suffered after her father was denounced by Nikita Khrushchev in 1956 and reduced to a near non-person in the years that followed. Svetlana's son, Joseph, hinted at this when he talked to reporters in Moscow. He explained that Stalin's death had had a great impact on his mother. "This was natural," he said. "She was Stalin's daughter. But she loved him just as anybody loves a father."